
Editorial: Garth Underwood – Dedication



This issue, the last of the Zoology series of the *Bulletin of the Natural History Museum*, is dedicated to Dr Garth Underwood. Garth has had a long association with the Natural History Museum. In 1964, he was appointed Principal Research Fellow to work on snake systematics, a project which culminated in the modestly titled “A contribution to the classification of snakes” (Underwood, 1967). This book had a major impact on snake classification, pioneering the use of soft anatomy as a source of systematic characters. Its importance may be readily appreciated from the many references made to it in many of the papers in this special issue of the *Bulletin* (see especially Kochva in the introduction to his paper on burrowing asps, *Atractaspis*). In a more informal sense, Garth’s association with the Natural History Museum started much earlier than 1964; a visit to the Museum in the late 1930’s apparently gave him useful information for answering his Higher School Certificate papers in Zoology! Like many zoologists, an interest in natural history was something that was ingrained, and it seems that Garth always was seeking explanations for biological phenomena. His father, Leon Underwood, an eminent British sculptor and painter, dedicated a book called *Animalia*, subtitled *Fibs about Beasts* to Garth, showing him as a baby, thoughtfully looking at a frog. The book offers poetic or fanciful explanations about the animals within its pages, rather than scientific ones. The dedication

reads: “To Garth, For whom cleaving facts asunder fall, And fancy sheds a healing light on all”. Garth, if not then, certainly now seeks more objective, scientific interpretations in the biological sciences, particularly of snake relationships.

Even a brief dedication such as this would be seriously deficient if it did not mention the contribution Garth has made to herpetology, not just in terms of his published work but through his encouragement and supervision of the studies of others. “A contribution to the classification of snakes” was a starting point; Garth has always sought new characters to shed new light on snake relationships, devised new ways of looking at data, and has never been afraid to revisit previous work to improve upon and revise earlier results. He has passed on these ideas to others; within the Museum alone he has supervised no less than 6 PhD’s, most relating to snakes, but also encompassing frog and insect systematics. He has also run undergraduate and postgraduate courses in taxonomy, through times when systematics was less appreciated than formerly or even today.

Many people owe Garth a considerable debt of gratitude for his help, guidance and support. He has been an inspiration to generations of undergraduates, postgraduates and scientific colleagues worldwide; we hope he will be pleased with this token of our appreciation.

Editors for this issue:
Barry Clarke and Mark Wilkinson

Sadly, Garth died on 15th October 2002 before this issue came out. He had seen or was aware of much of its contents.

Photograph showing Garth Underwood in May 1966 when he was working on his “Contribution to the classification snakes”. © The Natural History Museum